

DAILY BULLETIN

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RICE TURNS DIPLOMATIC FOCUS TO GAZA CRISIS

Secretary meets Palestinian President Abbas, calls for sustainable peace..... 1

U.S. HUMANITARIAN AID HEADED FOR LEBANON

Secretary Rice authorizes \$30 million to aid victims of hostilities in Lebanon 2

EU FALSELY LAYS BLAME FOR TRADE TALKS COLLAPSE, U.S. SAYS

European Union, India more at fault, trade expert Bergsten says 3

U.S. VISA PROCESS SHOULD BE STREAMLINED, OFFICIAL SAYS

Panelists discuss homeland security, visa policy 4

RICE TURNS DIPLOMATIC FOCUS TO GAZA CRISIS

Secretary meets Palestinian President Abbas, calls for sustainable peace

By David Shelby
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington – Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice shifted the focus of her diplomatic efforts from the crisis in Lebanon to the ongoing Israeli operations in Gaza July 25 as she met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah.

“[E]ven as the Lebanon situation resolves we must remain focused on what is happening here in the Palestinian Territories, on our desires to get back on a course that will lead ultimately to ... President Bush’s vision, but indeed the vision of President Abbas, of two states living side by side in peace,” Rice said at a press availability following her meeting with the Palestinian leader.

Israel has been carrying out military operations in Gaza since militants linked to the Palestinian Authority’s ruling Hamas party tunneled into Israel June 25, attacked an Israeli military post near the Gaza border and abducted an Israeli soldier. Israel has called for the immediate release of Corporal Gilad Shalit while the soldier’s captors have demanded the release of 1,000 Palestinian prisoners as well as all Palestinian women and children in Israeli jails first. “It is important that we end the Gaza crisis and I know that [President Abbas] is working hard to do that and to create the conditions on which that can end,” Rice said.

Abbas said, "We are also endeavoring with all of the means available to us to ensure release of the Israeli soldiers."

The secretary expressed concern for the difficult circumstances in which the Palestinians find themselves and pledged continued U.S. humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people, but she said the ultimate solution is "to get to a sustainable peace for this region."

"[W]e need to be able to make progress because the Palestinian people have lived too long in violence and in a sense of the daily humiliations that go along with the circumstances here," she said.

Rice said she had spoken with Israeli officials about fully implementing the November 2005 agreement on movement and access within the Palestinian Territories to facilitate Palestinian economic activity.

The November 2005 agreement gave the Palestinian Authority control over the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt and also called for the start of bus and truck convoys between Gaza and the West Bank, the reduction of obstacles to movement within the West Bank, the export of Palestinian agricultural products, authorization to begin construction of a Palestinian seaport and acknowledgement by the parties of the importance of a Palestinian airport.

Earlier on July 25, Rice met with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to discuss Israeli operations in Lebanon and Gaza. She travels to Rome July 26 to meet with representatives of countries seeking an end to the hostilities between Israel and the Lebanese militant group Hizbullah.

U.S. HUMANITARIAN AID HEADED FOR LEBANON

Secretary Rice authorizes \$30 million to aid victims of hostilities in Lebanon

Washington – U.S. humanitarian supplies are on their way to Lebanon after U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice authorized \$30 million in "immediate humanitarian assistance to victims of the conflict in Lebanon."

According to a July 24 statement by State Department deputy spokesman Tom Casey, "The United States is dispatching two large-scale medical deliveries," and other direct assistance is in the pipeline.

"Two health kits have landed in Lebanon today," U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) press director David Snider told the Washington File on July 25. Each kit will meet basic medical needs for 10,000 people for three months, he said.

A USAID Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) has been in the region since July 23. "Members of the DART team are on the ground in Lebanon to evaluate humanitarian needs and form assessments on how best to distribute supplies," Snider said.

Secretary Rice has asked that delivery corridors for humanitarian aid be opened in Lebanon. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert agreed on July 24 to allow supplies to be airlifted.

Lacking safe passage within Lebanon, aid agencies have been unable to transport aid to the hundreds of thousands of people who have been displaced by the conflict. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has supplies for more than 20,000 people waiting at the Syrian border. Briefing journalists in Geneva on July 25, UNHCR spokeswoman Jennifer Pagonis said, "We have hundreds of tons of tents, mattresses, blankets and other aid which could be delivered in a matter of hours." Other stockpiles of supplies are available in Kuwait and Iraq, she said.

The World Health Organization reported that Lebanese hospitals are running out of medicines and fuel for generators, the only source of electricity since Israeli bombing cut off power supplies, according to news agency reports. The toll of injured is in the thousands, while the death toll, mainly of civilians, has climbed above 400.

Rice made an unannounced stop in Beirut July 24 to assess the humanitarian needs in Lebanon. The Secretary was en route to Jerusalem to discuss the means of ending the conflict.

"We will continue to do all that we can to support the government of Lebanon as it seeks to address the needs of its people," Casey said.

EU FALSELY LAYS BLAME FOR TRADE TALKS COLLAPSE, U.S. SAYS

European Union, India more at fault, trade expert Bergsten says

By Bruce Odessey
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington -- U.S. trade negotiators have rebuked their European Union (EU) counterparts for what they view as false and misleading statements about the collapse of World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations.

An Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) statement released July 25 by the U.S. mission in Geneva rebuts an EU charge blaming the United States for the collapse a day earlier.

Reluctant to point the finger of blame as others rushed to do, U.S. negotiators nevertheless could not let stand the EU accusation that the United States was unwilling to show flexibility, the statement says.

The United States made clear it was ready to show more flexibility in cutting trade-distorting domestic support spending on its farmers even further than the 60 percent cuts it proposed in October 2005 but only if the EU and rapidly expanding developing countries would open their markets further to agricultural imports, the statement says.

The EU maintains average agricultural tariffs of 23 percent, nearly twice the 12 percent U.S. average, and domestic support spending of \$33 billion, nearly three times higher than the U.S. level, according to USTR.

"Unable to endorse the U.S. proposal, given substantial opposition from France and a few other member states with strong farm interests, the EU attempted, alternately, to criticize the U.S. proposal as too ambitious or too weak," the statement says.

"Most recently, the EU attacked the United States for failing to propose even more dramatic cuts to domestic support while at the same time insisting on the right to lavish more than twice as much trade-distorting subsidies on its farmers," it says.

USTR asserts that the EU proposal would allow little or no additional agricultural market access because of the number of products it would exclude. The EU proposal

would require zero change in current EU domestic support programs, USTR says.

WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy suspended the long-stalled negotiations, formally called the Doha Development Agenda, July 24 after a meeting with ministers from the United States, EU, Australia, Brazil, India and Japan revealed wide differences persisting over the politically sensitive agricultural issues. (See related article.)

Ministers from the EU and India quickly issued statements blaming the United States. C. Fred Bergsten, director of the Institute for International Economics in Washington, said in an interview that all the major countries share some of the blame.

"But I think the United States has, on the whole, been more forthright than the others in making proposals that would lead to success in the talks," Bergsten said. "It's Europe and India, in large part on agricultural policy, that have been naysayers that have caused the breakdown.

"At the end of the day, everybody's going to have to come back with better proposals to get a package on the table that will enable the negotiations to get going again," he said.

The USTR statement is available on the Web site of the U.S. mission in Geneva. A related fact sheet is available on the USTR Web site.

U.S. VISA PROCESS SHOULD BE STREAMLINED, OFFICIAL SAYS

Panelists discuss homeland security, visa policy

By Kate Ericsson
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington -- U.S. visa policies can and should be improved, concluded a group of experts -- including an official in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) -- during a recent discussion at the Heritage Foundation in Washington.

During the July 24 panel titled "Rethinking Visa Policy for the 21st Century," Stewart A. Baker, assistant secretary for policy at DHS, acknowledged that it could be difficult to obtain a U.S. visa. The visa process needs to be more efficient, streamlined and "a lot less hassle for people," said Baker. "These are ideas that we're currently struggling with."

Another panelist, James Jay Carafano, a senior research fellow on defense and homeland security at the Heritage Foundation, emphasized how important it is for the United States to have a visa policy that promotes economic growth, builds strong alliances and contributes to the safety and security of the nation. He also stressed how important and personal the visa application process is for people who want to visit the United States.

Currently, 27 countries participate in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which allows people traveling to the United States for tourism or business to stay for up to 90 days without a visa. In addition to the 27 -- mostly from Western Europe but including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore, Brunei and Slovenia -- there are more than a dozen so-called VWP Roadmap Countries that have expressed interest. According to Baker, the VWP Roadmap Countries are Bulgaria, Cypress, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and South Korea.

Countries have to meet certain immigration criteria to participate in the VWP, and they must issue machine-readable passports. "The last countries to join the VWP joined in 1999," said Baker. "Since September 11 [2001, when the United States was attacked by terrorists], no one has been added to the program, in part because of concerns about the security implications of adding to the VWP." He said the United States is examining whether changes to the program should be made and whether it

should be expanded, but he did not elaborate.

Carafano and another panelist, Dan Griswold, director of the Center for Trade and Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, said the Visa Waiver Program should be expanded. They said an expansion would enhance U.S. relations with other countries.

"I think the VWP has been a great success," said Griswold. He said the U.S. government should "be exploring prudent ways" to expand the program. The Roadmap Countries do not present an additional security risk to the United States, he said.

"It's hard to see a dividing line between those countries and the 27 countries already in the program, other than the matter of timing," Griswold said.

Carafano suggested that expanding the Visa Waiver Program "to countries in Eastern Europe and Asia, where the United States has growing economic, cultural, and security ties could both strengthen America's bonds to these nations and enhance security."

Security would be enhanced, he claimed, because VWP countries "must maintain the same security standards as the United States." Furthermore, "increased participation in VWP allows the Department of State and DHS to focus their assets on travelers from nations of greater concern," Carafano added.

"Unfortunately, I am cautiously pessimistic that Congress will do anything," said Griswold. "The House seems to be in the mood to build walls rather than take them down."

"We will have to wait for a more opportune moment to expand the Visa Waiver Program," he predicted.

The Heritage Foundation is a conservative policy research institution. Additional information on the Visa Waiver Program is available on the State Department Web site.

Pleases Note: Most texts and transcript mentioned in the U.S. Mission Daily Bulletin are available via our homepage: <http://geneva.usmission.gov/>

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